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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

WAS IT REALLY?

CORE COURSE 5602 ESSAY

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The War for American Independence is commonly referred to as the Revolutionary War. It was without a doubt a revolt against the British Empire and resulted in the birth of a new nation. But was it really a revolution? If so, did the leaders of this revolution follow any established principles for the conduct of revolutionary war? I believe it was a revolution in both character and conduct and propose to support my position by reviewing the American Revolution in the context of contemporary definitions and historical theories of revolutionary war.

In looking at the first question, I will cite two sources that present definitions of revolutionary war. In "Makers of Modern Strategy," John Shy and Thomas W. Collier provide a simple definition: "Revolutionary War refers to the seizure of political power by the use of armed force."¹ They then expand that simple definition to include in a revolution "seizure of power is by a popular or broad-based political movement, that seizure entails a fairly long period of armed conflict, and power is seized to carry out a well-advertised political or social program." Another definition presented in a National War College lecture is that, "Revolution is a radical, enduring change in social, economic and political power distribution."²

The American Revolution certainly meets sufficient criteria in both of those definitions to qualify it as a revolution. While the level of popular support for its political agenda may be debated, it is certain that enough colonists supported the movement to break away from Britain and her corresponding economic and political restrictions to sustain the revolt. It was a conflict that lasted almost eight years, from Lexington and Concord in April 1775 to the Peace of Paris in January 1783. And most certainly the

¹John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, "Revolutionary War," Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 817.

²Dr. Bernard D. Cole, "Mao and Theories of Revolutionary War," (lecture presented to National War College students on 27 October 1998), Arnold Auditorium, National War College, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

change following this war for independence was an enduring one

Before attempting to answer the second question it is important to recognize that while this war preceded written theory on wars of revolution, it exhibited some characteristics that may put it into that category of conflict none the less. The remainder of this essay will examine the basic character and conduct of the American Revolution and evaluate it in light of two theories of Revolutionary War: the first as outlined by Carl Clausewitz in the 19th century and the second by Mao Tse-tung in the 20th century.

The American Perspective

Character

The American colonists were fighting to gain independence from the colonial oversight of Great Britain. British forces were on the continent to protect this part of the British Empire, and were for the most part an experienced, professional military with a resource and technological edge over their colonial counterparts. The American forces were, in contrast, undermanned, under-resourced and for the most part relatively inexperienced. The colonials fought a war principally within the American colonies, fought it over a protracted period and saw a number of changes in strategy and different objectives as the war progressed. The political leadership charged with prosecuting the war was often torn between centralized control and preservation of state rights. This dilemma sometimes resulted in less than optimal support for the rebellion's generals.

Conduct

George Washington attempted to "mold (the Continental Army) into as close an approximation of the British army as possible, and his methods of using his army were as orthodox as circumstances would permit."³ He initially attempted an offensive

³Russell F. Weigley, "A Strategy of Attrition," The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), pp

strategy and conventional battle with the British main forces. The offensive to Canada failed and, in spite of what appeared to be initial success of his methods in Boston, Washington, still developing his strategy, now considered a general idea of a strategic defensive based on fortified posts and places of importance.⁴ Further military defeats caused that to change and the forces of the rebellion moved toward yet another strategy based on a concept to ensure survival of the Army. Eventually, the French provided the resources necessary for a strategic victory that would lead to the Peace of Paris. While Washington conducted this revolution without the benefit of any theoretical writings on the subject, to try to characterize this war, I believe it will be beneficial to take a retrospective look at it in light of the theorists that followed.

Clausewitz on Revolutionary War

When Clausewitz discussed revolutionary war in Chapter 26, Book Six, of "On War", he admitted that his experience and observations on this type of war were limited. None the less, he was successful in capturing the concept in his own terms.

Clausewitz's Conditions

Clausewitz identified five exclusive conditions that must be met for "the people's war" to succeed.⁵ Those conditions are as follows:

1. The war must be fought on the interior of the country.
2. It must not be decided by a single stroke.
3. The theater of operations must fairly large.
4. The national character must be suited to that kind of war.
5. The country must be rough and inaccessible, because of mountains, or forests, marshes, or local methods of cultivation.

⁴Russell F. Weigley, "A Strategy of Attrition," The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), pp. 8.

⁵Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 480.

Clausewitz goes on to say that neither the density nor the socio-economic status of the populace plays a large part in any of these conditions. He makes the observation that "rarely are there not enough people for the purpose"⁶ (of the revolution). George Washington may have disagreed as he tried to deal with the limitations on soldiers that he faced throughout the war.

Character

Clausewitz's first condition was certainly met during the American Revolution. The conflict took place within the geographical boundaries and coastal waters of the thirteen colonies and a number of defeats, at the hands of the British main forces, Washington intentionally avoided confrontations near the coast where the British Fleet provided land-based troops significant firepower, support and mobility advantages.

The theater also met the criteria of size as noted in Condition Three. The American Revolution was fought from Canada to Georgia and from the Atlantic coast to the mountains in the west. This large area afforded the colonial forces the opportunity for maneuver, facilitated escape routes and enhanced their ability to concentrate forces against dispersed British garrisons, "to nibble at the shell and around the edges" of the main enemy forces.⁷

I believe that in his fourth condition, Clausewitz meant that the people must be willing to take whatever actions were necessary to ensure the survival of a nation and its ideals, even if it meant paying an extremely high price for a satisfactory peace. "It is the natural law of the moral world that a nation that finds itself on the brink of an abyss will try to save itself by any means."⁸ For the American colonies this meant "accepting all of the risks of a protracted war, because American resources permitted no other way

⁶480 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 480.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 483.

to lay the military foundation of political independence”⁹ However, I believe that Clausewitz assumed that an armed insurrection or general uprising included a whole nation rendering armed resistance¹⁰ It is here I find a departure from his writings because that was not necessarily the case during the American Revolution While approximately 100,000 colonialists out of a total population of 2.5 million bore arms, no more than 35,000 were under arms at any one time and the majority of those were militias under state control¹¹ for local defense

Last, to effect a revolution, Clausewitz asserted that the terrain must be conducive to the methods and needs of the revolutionary forces A large area with diverse terrain and conditions, the colonial territory certainly met all those criteria And history shows that terrain did impact on the conduct of the war and enhanced the ability of the colonialists to prosecute the conflict on their terms

Conduct

Clausewitz’s second condition implies that the conflict will be a protracted one This is primarily because the revolutionary forces will normally begin at a disadvantage when engaging the enemy’s main force Without sufficient resources to achieve decisive victory, time can work to the advantage of the lesser force This is exactly the situation in which George Washington and the Continental Army found themselves In spite of having some time to assemble his forces and in spite of achieving some degree of success in Boston, after the loss of New York, “Washington avoided confrontations with the main British Army whenever he could do so”¹² Without the requisite forces to

⁹Russell F. Weigley, “A Strategy of Attrition,” The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), pp 4

¹⁰Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp 479

¹¹Larry Addington, The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp 12

¹²Russell F. Weigley, “A Strategy of Attrition,” The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), pp

gain decisive victory, the conditions were set for the war to continue for another seven years

In addition to identifying the essential conditions for revolutionary success, Clausewitz provides some guidance on how to prosecute this type of war. He advocated generally dispersed forces and recommended points of concentration, to be strongest at the flanks and rear of the enemy forces. He also asserted that the military commander could better shape the popular uprising by supporting the insurgents with small units of the regular army.¹³ Given the diverse nature of his forces and the overall lack of success in confrontations with the main British Army, Washington adopted this strategy to gain small victories, disperse British forces and to conserve the strength of his army.

In Clausewitz's terms, the conditions were set for the American Revolution to succeed, and after an initial error in judgment, Washington did adopt a strategy that Clausewitz would have felt necessary for victory in a war of revolution.

Mao Tse-tung on Revolutionary War

A hundred years after Clausewitz, in quite a contrasting environment, Mao Tse-tung, wrote his theory for successful revolutionary war in China. I will focus on four of Mao's observations for this type of conflict¹⁴ and discuss them further below.

1. Revolutionary war will be a protracted war.
2. It will require different types of forces conducting different operations either independent of or in conjunction with the others.
3. Protracted war is conducted in a series of stages, but doesn't necessarily

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¹³Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 482.

¹⁴Dr. Bernard D. Cole, "Mao and Theories of Revolutionary War," (lecture presented to National War College students on 27 October 1998), Arnold Auditorium, National War College, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

follow those stages sequentially

4 The Army is not only an instrument of war, but also the focal point for all activities associated with the revolution

Character

Additionally, Mao identified four characteristics of China's revolutionary war¹⁵ He noted that China had been through one revolution and, as a result of the great disparity between the relatively small industrial force and the enormous peasant work force, was ripe for revolution again In the colonies, twenty years before the revolution, the French had been forced out of the New World Now the British, as the new "haves," were taxing the colonial "have nots" to support the price of their control over the colonies

Mao's second characteristic was "the great strength of the enemy " The American colonists faced a great colonial power, with military and economic resources that far exceeded that of the colonies Third, Mao assessed his Red Army as weak and small Washington continuously voiced his concern about the quality and quantity of his forces, and about his difficulty in obtaining sufficient supplies and equipment for his Army However, while initially the Red Army was small and weak, Mao's advantage lay in his capacity to mobilize ever-increasing forces to reach a numerical advantage Washington was only able to finally reach a regional numerical advantage through significant foreign intervention Mao's final characteristic was that of the Communist Party's leadership of the agrarian reform While the Continental Congress was the body of leadership charged with leading the American Revolution, its political character was significantly different than that of the communist party in China The strength of the party in China depended on the education and mobilization of the populace and the Red Army was the key to that process The strength of the Continental Congress was in the

¹⁵Mao Tse-tung (Zedong), "Characteristics of China's Revolutionary War," Guerilla Warfare and Marxism, ed William J Pomeroy (New York, NY International Publishers, 1968), pp 179-181

representative process and the Army, while of supreme importance, was but an instrument to achieve the Congress' political objectives

Conduct

Mao discussed four distinct types of forces necessary for the conduct of a revolutionary war: main forces, main forces acting as guerillas, guerilla forces and village or self-defense forces.¹⁶ We see similarities with the forces available to Washington throughout the term of the war. The Continental Army served as his "main force" and militia troops acted not only in concert with the regulars, but also as the self-defense force in each colony. After the failure to defeat the British main forces, we see the rise of new partisan forces, under both Army and militia leadership, designed to disrupt, destroy and discourage British forces by the use of "unconventional" means.

In light of the characteristics of China's war, Mao saw his chance for victory through a strategy of protracted war and he outlined three distinct phases for its conduct.¹⁷ The first phase was the enemy's strategic offensive and the revolutionary's concurrent strategic defensive, the second phase was the enemy's strategic consolidation and the revolutionary's preparation for a counter-offensive, and the final phase was the enemy's strategic retreat and the revolutionary's strategic offensive. In the execution of these phases, however, Mao emphasized their linear rather than their sequential nature. He cautioned that the leaders of revolutions must continuously assess the situation to ensure that the right strategy is being employed.

During the first two phases, it was necessary to conserve resources and build the strength of his Army. With this in mind, Mao not only avoided battles against the

¹⁶Dr. Bernard D. Cole, "Mao and Theories of Revolutionary War," (lecture presented to National War College students on 27 October 1998), Arnold Auditorium, National War College, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷Ibid.

enemy's main force, but also avoided the resource intensive task of occupying territory.¹⁸ Washington eventually recognized that if he were to save his Army and ultimately succeed in the revolution, he would be required to do the same. After the loss of New York, he fought one major battle at Brandywine, more for political than military reasons, only "because the Revolutionary cause could not afford the ignominy of abandoning the Congressional capital at Philadelphia without a fight."¹⁹ His revised strategy was one of attrition or as Russell Weigley put it, a "strategy of erosion" to wear away the resolution of the British. He conducted defensive operations when necessary, struck the British forces with raids and attacks against detachments and outposts, and developed a significant intelligence network throughout the countryside that provided the information he needed to avoid the enemy strengths and execute his operations with an element of surprise.

As the war continued, the British began to wear down, they dispersed their forces. To counter this new colonial strategy, they saw a decline in Loyalist support and faced the continuing costs of a protracted war. Meanwhile, Washington's strategy allowed him to conserve his forces and with the assistance of the French, to gain sufficient resources to execute a "strategic offensive" against the British forces at Yorktown and achieve the conditions for a revolutionary success.

Conclusions

The War for American Independence was in fact a revolution and the strategy eventually adopted by the colonies was revolutionary. That strategy conformed to most of the concepts of revolutions found in the theories developed after our war had ended.

¹⁸John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, "Revolutionary War," Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 839.

¹⁹Russell F. Weigley, "A Strategy of Attrition," The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973), pp.

Again, the one significant difference I see between the character of the American Revolution and the conflicts described by Clausewitz and Mao, is the level of mobilization adopted to pursue this conflict. To Clausewitz and Mao, revolutionary war is total war, involving every resource available. The Continental Congress' policy of short term enlistment's and the competing demands for regulars and militia lead me to believe that while additional resources could have been available, they were not because of politics. With the arrival of foreign intervention, the colonies were only required to provide just enough manpower to achieve their objective of independence from Britain. However this one departure, does not disqualify this conflict as a revolution.

As to the relevance for our world, I believe that the contemporary existence of some or all of the basic conditions outlined above could set the stage for future revolutionary conflict. As for the validity of revolutionary war theory, I agree with John Shy and Thomas W. Collier when they say that revolution contains powerful emotive power and that "without specific social, political and psychological conditions that make revolution possible strategic technique is meaningless" ²⁰. As we move into a future where we can expect an increase in asymmetrical threats to our interests, it is incumbent upon us to recognize the conditions that may provide the potential for revolutionary conflict and understand what strategies may emerge when they do erupt.

²⁰John Shy and Thomas W. Collier, "Revolutionary War," Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 819.